



The Children's LAW Center of Connecticut, Inc.
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TESTIMONY OF JUSTINE RAKICH-KELLY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CHILDREN'S LAW CENTER, INC.

Senator Osten, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Justine Rakich-Kelly and I am the Executive Director of The Children's Law Center (CLC). I have served in that role for over 22 years. I am respectfully requesting an increase in our line item to \$180,000. This line item is under the umbrella of the Judicial Branch.

We have been grateful recipients of funding from the State of Connecticut since 2007. Unfortunately, the funding has been incrementally reduced over the years, even though our caseloads have increased - going from \$150,000 in 2007 when we represented 351 children to \$92,446 in 2022 when we represented 750 children. We currently we have active cases involving 424 children...and it is February.

In short, we are doing more with less and it is simply not sustainable.

The Courts continue to lean heavily on CLC to help at risk children. In 2022, we had to close intake for new cases in December because the caseloads for our limited staff were unsustainably high. We have only recently re-opened for new cases and in a limited number of jurisdictions. I continue to field calls and emails from court personnel inquiring when we will start taking cases again.

With increased funding of \$180,000 per annum, we hope to hire another staff attorney to ensure that we can maintain high level services while preserving service continuity.

CLC's Legal Representation program is unduplicated by any other organization in the state. CLC is appointed by the Court to represent the interests of indigent children caught in the middle of high-conflict family court cases. Often the family faces additional challenges such as mental health, addiction, incarceration, or domestic violence.

The children at the center of these disputes have no participation in the court process but suffer the negative consequences of high conflict such as depression, sleep disorders, loss of self-esteem, and behavioral regression. The goal of our Legal Representation program is to focus on the needs of children. We combine the expertise of a legal and mental health professional, allowing us to assess the strengths and challenges of the family and provide resources to address their needs and strengthen parenting. Incorporating a mental health component, we value an approach to family court cases that is non-adversarial and focuses on resolutions that are child-focused. We work with parents to strengthen their communication and co-parenting skills, emphasizing the important role each plays in the lives of their children. Whenever appropriate, we work with families to reach agreements outside of court that are child-centered and informed by our recommendations. Often, with some guidance, parents reach final agreements without ever having a trial.

When this is not possible, we testify at trial as to what we have determined to be in the child's best interest. While our recommendations are not "rubber stamped" by the court, often the court enters orders that reflect our recommendations, knowing that we have done a thorough investigation,

provided resources to the parents and children, and focused our recommendations on the best interest of the children.

Each case is unique and there is no predetermined time frame for each case. Each case presents with distinctive facts and challenges. Some cases can go on for years.

CLC was founded specifically to fill a gap in services for underprivileged children in family court cases where risk factors were present but where no legal representation was ordered because the parents were unable to afford to pay. For that reason, we only provided services to children whose parents fell below 125% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. Recently, at the prompting of the Judicial Branch, we began accepting cases on a sliding fee scale for those children who might otherwise fall through the cracks because their parents earn too much to qualify for legal aid but not enough to afford private representation for their children.

The bottom line is this: We offer an invaluable service not only to the children of Connecticut but also to the Courts of Connecticut. We cannot afford to continue at this level without additional financial support. We respectfully request that you increase our funding to \$180,000.

Thank you,



Justine Rakich-Kelly